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Author Bio:

Justin D. Garrison is an associate professor of political science at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. He is a political theorist who researches the relationship between politics and the imagination. He is the author of journal articles, book chapters, and the book *An Empire of Ideals: The Chimeric Imagination of Ronald Reagan* (Routledge, 2013). He is also co-editor of the book *The Historical Mind: Humanistic Renewal in a Post-Constitutional Age* (SUNY, 2020).

Chapter Title:

Projections Upon the Void: Irving Babbitt’s Critique of Naturalism

Chapter Abstract:

Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) was a professor of comparative literature at Harvard, and he was at the forefront of the early twentieth century American New Humanism movement. One of his enduring topics of concern was analyzing the ideational and imaginative dimensions of what he called “naturalism” in modern and American political thought and practice.

For Babbitt, naturalism came in two distinct though complementary strains. The first he called “scientific naturalism” and the second he called “sentimental naturalism.” Although scientific naturalism tends to place more emphasis upon rationality than the sentimental type, both versions are highly imaginative, that is, appeal to and seek to change a person’s pre-conceptual sense of how reality holds together and what in politics is truly possible. Both versions of naturalism reject the notion that human nature consists to some degree or another of permanent moral imperfection. Hence, the naturalists see politics as a program, not of cultivating individual ethical restraint, but of emancipating humanity from its poorly-organized, confining, and even evil past.

This chapter explains why Babbitt was deeply troubled by the theories and practical fruits associated with the naturalist movement. For Babbitt, naturalists of the scientific and sentimental types fundamentally misunderstood the human condition and thus supported a politics inclined toward individual moral chaos and national and international violence. Most vividly in his own life, he believed the two pillars of naturalism made significant contributions to the outbreak and inhumane conduct of World War I. The ideas and imaginative disposition driving naturalism remain alive and well. Thus, understanding Babbitt’s critique of this movement in his own time will shed light on the disorders of the present as well as ways to work toward a reconstitution of individual and social order along the lines of Babbitt’s preferred “humanistic” alternative to naturalism.